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Nicaraguan Army: 'War Machine' Or Defender of a Besieged Nation?

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WASHINGTON, March 29 — The threat that Nicaragua's Army may pose to other Central American countries has become a central issue in the debate over renewed United States financing for the rebels fighting to topple the Government.

The Administration says the army is a juggernaut, far larger than the other Central American militaries and poised to attack its neighbors. But Democrats in Congress and some officials in the Administration say they believe the White House has overstated its case.

At the same time, however, even many of the Administration's critics agree with two of President Reagan's other major concerns about Nicaragua: that many Sandinista leaders are Marxist-Leninists and that they have aided El Salvador's leftist guerrillas.

Reagan Sees a 'War Machine'

Mr. Reagan has accused the Nicaraguans of building "a war machine" that "dwarfs the forces of all their neighbors combined."

In February, Vice President Bush belittled "some who still insist" that "these Marxists have no extraterritorial ambitions."

In interviews with more than two dozen officials in the White House, the Defense and State Departments, Congress and private organizations involved with Central American affairs, these were some of the main findings:

¶The Salvadoran and Guatemalan regular armies, with 48,000 and 40,000 troops, are each nearly as large as the Nicaraguan Army, which has 40,000 regular troops and another 20,000 militia members on active duty, according to Defense Department figures. When all the other Central American armies are combined, they are far larger than Nicaragua's. On the other hand, when army troops and militia are lumped together, Nicaragua's military forces are larger than those of any other Central American country, although Guatemala claims to have a 900,000-member Rural Civil Guard.

¶Senior Administration officials, in speeches and in public reports, have frequently said Nicaragua intends to attack its neighbors. But State and Defense Department officials say unofficially that they do not believe Nicaragua has any such intention.

¶President Reagan has said that "the Sandinista military buildup began

two and a half years before" the United States-backed Nicaraguan rebels took up arms and was not a result of rebel attacks. But Defense Department records show that the first shipment of heavy Soviet-made arms to Nicaragua came many months after the first reports of rebel attacks.

¶Nicaraguan officials have said one reason for their buildup is that they fear an American invasion. Administration officials confirmed that since at least 1983, the United States had used a "perception management" program, as a classified Defense Department document called it, to keep the Nicaraguans concerned that the United States might attack.

¶White House and State Department officials were unable to verify the accuracy of several quotations that the President and others have attributed to Nicaraguan leaders in support of their assertions about Nicaragua's intentions. In one case, the State Department acknowledged that it knew of no Sandinista official who ever used an often-quoted phrase that Nicaragua seeks a "revolution without frontiers."

Even the Administration's critics agree with several of the President's fundamental assertions about Nicaragua.

Many of them say they are convinced that Nicaragua has supplied arms and other assistance to El Salvador's leftist rebels, although there is disagreement about the scope of that assistance and whether it continues.

Representative Michael D. Barnes, Democrat of Maryland, the chairman of the House Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs, said that "there is no doubt" about Nicaragua's "support to the left in El Salvador."

Administration critics also agree that many of Nicaragua's leaders are Marxist-Leninists with close ties to Cuba. To some Administration supporters, that fact alone is sufficient evidence of aggressive intent.

There also is widespread concern that Nicaragua could become a Soviet military base. "There's a possibility for air bases and submarine pens," said Senator Richard G. Lugar, Republican of Indiana, the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee. Soviet and Nicaraguan officials have denied such assertions.

Army's Size and Ability Is a Matter of Dispute

A White House spokesman said Otto J. Reich, Ambassador for Latin American public diplomacy, was the official best suited to outline the Administration's concerns about Nicaragua and the evidence to support them.

In an interview, Mr. Reich described the Nicaraguan Army as "enormous in relation to its immediate environment" and added that "invasion is one of the things we are concerned about."

The Defense Department estimates

that the Nicaraguan Army includes about 40,000 regular, active-duty troops and another 20,000 civilian militia members on active duty, for a total troop strength of about 60,000.

The department also estimates that El Salvador has 48,000 troops on active duty, Honduras has 21,000 and Guatemala has about 40,000, for a combined troop strength of about 109,000. Costa Rica has no army but does have a 9,500-man Civil Guard.

Nicaragua also has a civilian militia of 50,000, in addition to those on active duty, and Administration officials sometimes include the militia in their public statements about the size of the Nicaraguan Army.

Carlos Tunnerman Bernheim, the Nicaraguan Ambassador to the United States, said the militia included "all types of people: factory workers, students, women, children and old people."

All of them, he said, "have had some minimal training," adding that they would be issued weapons if Nicaragua were invaded.

A Defense Department official, acknowledging that the militia includes some women and children, said that "we don't know how well trained they are" or how many have arms.

Costa Rica has a 10,000-member civilian militia, Honduras has a 4,500-member "public security" force and Guatemala claims to have a 900,000-member rural defense force.

Of the assertions of a possible Nicaraguan invasion of its neighbors, Foreign Minister Miguel d'Escoto Brockman of Nicaragua said, "To believe that is to believe that in addition to being evil, we are also insane."

A senior Defense Department official directly involved with Central American affairs agreed, saying that "we don't expect an attack" because "we don't think they would be that stupid."

"That would be the solution" to the Nicaragua problem, he added, because the United States would "most certainly" attack.

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Administration officials frequently point to Nicaragua's armor as evidence of aggressive intent. Nicaragua has more tanks than any other country in the region.

In a speech last month, Vice President Bush said Nicaragua had "over 150 tanks." And Government white papers describing a Nicaraguan threat point out that Nicaragua has "heavy ferries to give additional amphibious mobility" to the tanks, as one white paper said. It also noted that Nicaragua's borders with Honduras and Costa Rica are "largely defined by rivers."

Defense Department officials say the Nicaraguans have 110 Soviet-built T-54 and T-55 tanks that are 25 to 30 years old. Col. Lawrence L. Tracy, the State Department's military adviser for Latin American public diplomacy, said the tanks "couldn't survive against modern antitank weaponry." Colonel Tracy is one of the authors of the Government's most recent white paper, issued in March.

Since most of Nicaragua is too hilly for tanks, to be used against Honduras

they would probably have to be loaded on flatbed trucks and driven up the Pan-American Highway, Colonel Tracy and others said.

That could be "suicidal," Colonel Tracy said. The Honduran Air Force, which includes more than two dozen jet fighters and bombers, "could easily take them out," a senior Defense Department official said, since Nicaragua has "no significant air force to speak of."

Mr. Reagan, in a 1983 session with reporters, said Nicaragua had "fighter planes, bombers and so forth."

Defense Department officials say Nicaragua has no jet fighters or bombers or other modern combat aircraft, except about 10 sophisticated Soviet helicopter gunships.

Mr. Reich said, "If all the Nicaraguan tanks were to simply occupy a plain in southern Honduras, they could humiliate the Honduran Army, and the Government could collapse."

But Mr. Reich also acknowledged that the "Sandinista military hasn't shown us much so far" in its war against the rebels.

Nicaraguan Buildup: Origin Is Debated

Ambassador Turnerman, like other Nicaraguan officials, said that "we had to increase our military because we are facing aggression from the contras," as the rebels are often called.

But a senior State Department official contended that "they announced their intentions and were rushing pell-mell to buy tanks long before the contras were a threat." Nicaragua denies that.

The first clear statement of Nicaragua's intent was a Government paper called "the 72-hour document." Published in Managua in the fall of 1979, a few months after the Sandinistas came to power, it reported "in detail on an extraordinary meeting Sept. 21 to 23" of the Sandinista leadership, a State Department cable from Managua said. The United States Ambassador called the document "remarkably frank," and Reagan Administration officials frequently cite it.

Of military plans, the document said, "Though we do not wish to downplay the need for a strong military to take care of national defense, we would like to point out that at the present time there is no clear indication of an armed counterrevolution" and "what merits our attention is domestic factors."

At the same time, in 1979 Cuba was sending a variety of specialists to Nicaragua, including military advisers, and a Defense Department official said that showed that the Nicaraguans "had this buildup planned all along."

Bosco Matamoros, an official in the largest rebel group, the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, said recently that armed rebels began attacks in Nicaragua in 1980. That is also when Sandinista officials began complaining of attacks. And in recent interviews, rebel leaders have said they began receiving training and assistance from the Argentine military in 1980.

In February 1981, Nicaragua announced it would form a large citizen militia: By then, 67 Nicaraguan soldiers had been killed in attacks by several hundred rebels, many of them former Nicaraguan National Guardsmen who had been operating out of Honduras for more than a year, press reports of the time said.

Also in February 1981, Defense Minister Humberto Ortega Saavedra asserted that Nicaragua needed a large militia because "there is a danger that the thousands of former National Guardsmen abroad" could find support from the United States.

Months later, in mid-1981, a senior Defense Department official said, Nicaragua acquired its first Soviet-made tanks. Until then, another Defense Department official said, they had been receiving "small arms and light artillery, mostly."

Late that year, President Reagan authorized the Central Intelligence Agency to begin aiding the Nicaraguan rebels.

U.S. Has Stirred Fears of Invasion

Nicaraguan officials have repeatedly said they are worried about a United

States invasion, and since at least 1983 the Reagan Administration has intentionally reinforced those fears, senior Administration officials confirmed.

A 1983 Defense Department document on "Central American initiatives" mentioned a "perception management program" to be "coupled with the activities of" the Big Pine II military maneuvers held that August in Honduras. The Defense Department "will take the lead" in the program, the document said, with help from the C.I.A. and the State Department.

A senior State Department official confirmed this week that the program was still in place and said its purpose was to gain concessions from the Nicaraguan Government. "Every time there's an invasion scare, they make some concessions," he said. Another senior official said, "We do our best to keep them concerned."

Statements from the President and other senior officials in Washington raise invasion concerns in Managua. But the most important element of the program, officials said, has been a series of large-scale American military maneuvers in Honduras, beginning in early 1983. From the start Administration officials have said the maneuvers were intended to intimidate Nicaragua.

"One of the central purposes is to create fear of an invasion," a senior Administration official said. The American troops "push very close to the border, deliberately, to set off all the alarms," he added.

Ambassador Turnerman said that "with 12,000 troops on our border" and a "corresponding escalation of statements from the Government" in Washington, "we have reason to be concerned."

The Defense Department is preparing for large-scale maneuvers along the Nicaraguan-Honduran border that will begin within a few weeks.

The Administration intentionally scared the Nicaraguans in another manner last November, when officials in Washington said a ship docking in Nicaragua might be carrying Soviet fighter planes.

Administration officials said later that no planes had been unloaded. But during the MIG crisis, as Nicaraguans now call it, American surveillance aircraft flying over Managua caused a series of sonic booms, further alarming the Nicaraguans at a time when tensions were already high.

Such planes frequently fly over Nicaragua and other countries without causing sonic booms.

Mr. Reich confirmed that the booms were intended to scare the Nicaraguans. Another senior State Department official said that "there is talk about doing the same thing again."

Central American Troop Strengths

Numbers are approximate.

Nicaragua

Regular armed forces	40,000
Civilian militia members now on active duty.....	20,000
Other civilian militia members	50,000

El Salvador

Regular armed forces	48,000
National Guard, Treasury Police, National Police	8,500

Honduras

Regular armed forces	21,000
Public security forces.....	4,500

Guatemala

Regular armed forces	40,000
Treasury Police, National Police	11,000
Rural Civil Guard	900,000

Costa Rica

Regular armed forces	None
Civil and Rural Guards	9,500
Civil militia.....	10,000

Source: Defense Department and Central American Governments